Film: News

Looking back in Anger?

Fire And Brimstone

From 'Fireworks' (1947) to 'Lucifer Rising', recently premiered in New York — Kenneth Anger has been the enfant terrible of *US underground film for a long, long time. But age, as* Jack English *discovered, hasn't dulled his demonic imagination, or made his surname any less appropriate.*

Earlier this year in New York, a new version of Kenneth Anger's long-awaited film 'Lucifer Rising' was premiered. After such a turbulent history (see below), the acclaim for the 30-minute 'birthday for the Aquarian age' (which includes 'Performance' director Donald Cammell and Marianne Faithfull as well as Anger himself) was spectacular. One critic said it 'contained some of the most striking lighting effects ever captured on film'.

Its subject, Lucifer — the fallen angel — has long possessed and inspired Anger's work, as has his fascination with the 'sex Magick' of the English occultist Aleister Crowley. Anger portrays God's beautiful but rebellious favourite as a bringer of light, and describes the film as 'a sympathetic view of what's usually called the devil, the personification of evil. The title implies that Lucifer is forgiven, ascending back to heaven . . . heresy according to Catholicism. I don't think the Protestants have gotten around to those details.'

After screening the film, Anger talked with Jack English about the ruins of Karnac, Debbie Reynolds, Malcolm Muggeridge and sex, the Ayatollah-Communist plot to destroy America through heroin, Ronald Reagan ('Now America has a president that used to act with a monkey'), being allergic to TV, Malcolm McLaren ('sounds like a bastard'), Bianca Jagger, anarchism and capitalism, the devil's voice on 'The Exorcist', meetings with John Lennon ('You're an Aleister Crowley chap') and his killer, the Dakota building, and a strange encounter with Mickey Rooney. He refused to discuss Andy Warhol under any circumstances. For lack of space, this is a heavily- edited version of that transcript...

Could you tell me about the reasons for your full page ad in New York's Village Voice *in 1967 renouncing film-making?*

'My abandoning film-making was through Bobby Beausoleil who had been my original Lucifer. After a quarrel he broke into my studio, stole all the film, took it down to Southern California and gave it to Charles Manson. I was devastated as I'd worked so hard on the film. Manson sent up an emissary saying you can have the film back for $10,000. My reply was I didn't have the money and if I did I wouldn't accept this type of blackmail. Could I have afforded the ransom I still wouldn't have paid Manson. This was the first example of holding a stolen film to ransom ever in film history.' (Beausoleil is currently serving a life sentence for his participation in the Manson murders in Tracy Prison, where he recorded a soundtrack for 'Lucifer Rising' by 'Bobby Beausoleil and the Freedom Orchestra'—ed.)

Why was 'Lucifer Rising' ten years in the making?

'Because I refused to give up. No bank would front me the money because I'm not "bankable". "Bankable" is an American term which means someone who shows a profit. Banks don't give a damn about the film. All they care about is making a profit. They would front the money for "French Connection II" which lost money. The banks are so stupid — they think that because one thing made money the sequels will too.'

I still find ten years a long time.

'Not to me. You don't really mean that. Not to make a work of art! Some pyramids took twenty-five years to build, cathedrals in Europe took hundreds.'

I'm amazed you can't get backing to finish transferring 'Lucifer' to 35mm, and start 'Lucifer' part two.

'You can be amazed. Money's very tight. In other words, people like Francis Coppola know I need the money. Paul Getty knows I need the money. They're millionaires. They won't give it to me. The rich people I know are bastards. Mick Jagger's a fucking bastard. He's mean. He said, "Oh Kenneth, you'll never finish it with help from me". Well, I have finished it. Part of the reason was to defy him. He's over the hill. His little act is over the hill...' ('Lucifer Rising's' credits contain the line 'Presented by Anita Pallenberg' —ed.)

Why did you cast Marianne Faithfull as Lilith in 'Lucifer Rising'?

'I type-cast. Marianne Faithfull plays a destructive female and she was. She's playing herself. She plays Lilith the demon female, destruction in female form.'

Could you tell me about Michael Cooper, the cameraman on 'Lucifer Rising'?

'He committed suicide — because I bawled him out too often. Michael Cooper photographed the "Sgt. Pepper" cover. I was responsible for his suicide. He was already depressed and very thin skinned, I bawled him out and he went and took some pills...'

You have put curses on people in the past. Would you put a curse on me if you didn't like the interview?

'Maybe. I've never put a curse on a journalist before...'

Why did you choose Jimmy Page to write a soundtrack for 'Lucifer Rising'?

'Because he collects Aleister Crowley and so do I. The philosophy behind the film is Crowley and I thought the fact that Jimmy Page collects Crowley would make him sympathetic to it...'

Did you see the Led Zepplin film 'The Song Remains the Same'?

'I refuse to see it. He could have got me to make the film. Instead he chose some arsehole. It's a good film for rock fans to go and see. Rock fans will see whoever they're hot for in the poorest trash. It doesn't matter whether it's high fidelity or low fidelity, in or out of focus. They'll go and see it anyway...'

Which contemporary film-makers do you respect?

'None.'

How do you respect rock music?

'Respect is a word I'd never use. It's not in my vocabulary. Either I like something or I hate it. I like some rock music, but so much of it is garbage these days. Frankly at this stage of my life if I never hear another note of rock music I'll be perfectly happy.'

What is the music which you have on now?

'It's DW Griffith's organ music. This is what they used to play in movie palaces. It's the score of "Birth of a Nation" played by Lee Urwin. As I've stated previously, the idea of using, stringing together pop singles for a soundtrack was mine ("Scorpio Rising" 1963). It's an easy way to make a soundtrack. Instead of hiring a bunch of musicians, you just buy some little singles and string them together and call it the soundtrack...'

Were you disappointed with the general reaction to 'Scorpio Rising'?

'It's the least important of my films. The general public never saw it when it was first screened. Many lawsuits were filed. I suppose some because of male nudity. One lawsuit was from the American Nazi party claiming I had desecrated the Swastika...'

If someone took and copied one of your ideas, would you be annoyed or flattered?

'What sort of twit do you think I am? Of course I would be annoyed. More than that, I'd put a curse on them... I have been ripped off by everybody. Scorsese is the only one who considered giving me a half-hearted apology for copying my ideas. He said he's using pop music for films like 'Mean Streets', the idea for which was derived from my film "Scorpio Rising". Ken Russell uses volcanoes and things like that in (his new movie) "Altered States" which I think he got from "Lucifer Rising". I know he rented "LR" because I've seen the rental receipt. I think that's shitty.'

Were you happy with your book, 'Hollywood Babylon' (his scurrilous exposé of Hollywood gossip, culled from his early years as a child movie star)? Did you have to make any compromises?

'I thought I did a good job on the book. It was quite close to what I wanted to do. I had to drop a chapter devoted to Joan Crawford, her mistreatment of her children. Joan Crawford was still alive and heard about it. She said she'd sue me so it had to be dropped by my publisher. Now she's dead I'll probably include it in "Son of Hollywood Babylon". The chapter included Joan Crawford making her daughter lick out the toilet bowl — very sick things. She was mad. Totally mad. The daughter in revenge has written a bestseller called "Mommy Dearest". I'm pleased, although I wrote about them two years before. I'm pleased because can you imagine Joan Crawford died a million-airess... didn't leave a penny to either the adopted son or daughter. They hate her guts with good reason...'

Kenneth Anger's 'Magick Lantern Cycle' shows regularly in London. Enquiries about 'Lucifer Rising' to American Federation of Arts, 41 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10021.

A young Kenneth Anger, à la Cocteau.